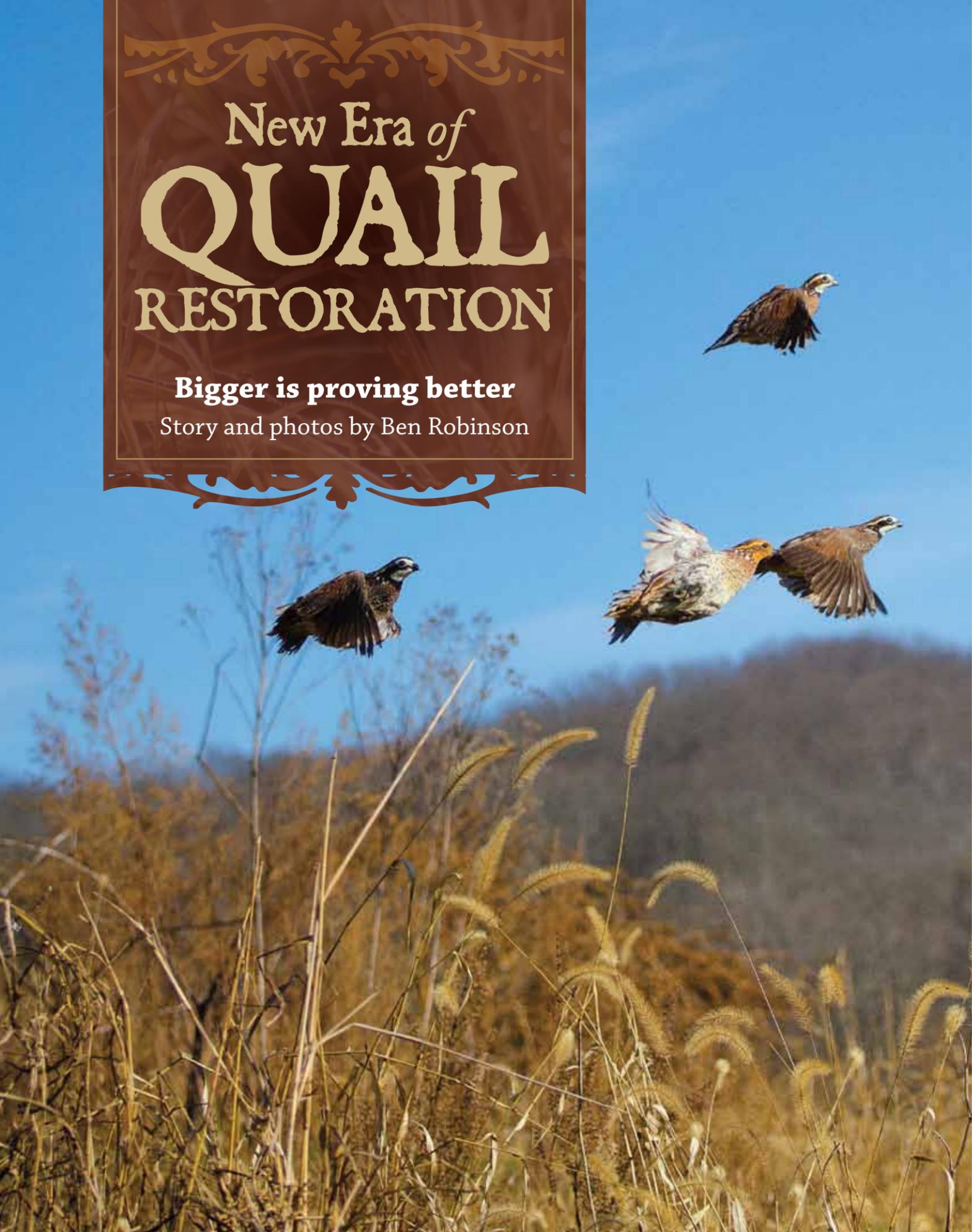


New Era of QUAIL RESTORATION

Bigger is proving better
Story and photos by Ben Robinson



LONG BEFORE white-tailed deer and wild turkey ruled Kentucky's hunting scene, another animal reigned supreme: The bobwhite quail, revered as the gentleman's game bird, was once held in the highest regard. Made popular by its distinctive *bob-white* whistle, this classic bird has become a symbol of rural life across its entire range.

Hunters, farmers and wildlife watchers all appreciate the melodic whistle that has resounded through the hills of Kentucky's countryside for decades. Not many animals bring about such joy for so many people.

Ask an old-time quail hunter to identify the glory days of modern-day quail hunting in Kentucky and that person will reminisce back to a time when ten covey days were the norm. It was a time when setters and pointers outnumbered black and yellow Labrador retrievers. The decade was the 1960s — and the bobwhite quail was king.

While that same group of folks may not agree about why this era was so plentiful with quail, conversations eventually circle back to one leading factor: Quail in the glory days had many more acres to call home.

BOBWHITE HISTORY

Although quail populations have been declining slowly for nearly a century, the declines were made most obvious following the severe winters of 1977 and 1978.

Similar weather around 1917 concerned sportsmen as the harsh winter caused quail populations to plummet. Historical records show that the old Kentucky Game and Fish Commission responded by attempting their first quail restocking effort. The attempt proved to be unsuccessful, mainly because the Mexican quail used were stressed and sickly upon arrival in the state.

The commission was eager to continue experimenting with restocking quail; other birds were shipped in. By 1930, nearly 100,000 Mexican quail were imported and released across the state. The agency dropped the importation effort two years later, determining it unsuccessful.

Quail restoration efforts next shifted to raising native birds in captivity for release into the wild. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources purchased property in 1946 to begin raising its own birds. The properly named Game Farm, located outside of Frankfort at the current headquarters of Kentucky Fish and Wildlife,



Restoring habitat is critical to quail restoration.

Program has had many successes over its 25-year lifespan. Scores of landowners have improved quail habitat on their properties, and many of them reaped the benefits as quail began to flourish on their land. While many landowners praise the results they've experienced on their farms, others have not been as successful.

As Kentucky Fish and Wildlife moves into a new era of quail restoration, managers have begun to critically evaluate the successes and failures of nearly three decades of hard work.

While HIP has been successful overall, some view this as a shotgun approach to quail management. Using a single county as an example, a private lands biologist might work with a dozen 100-acre landowners spread across an area with more than 200,000 acres. The participating landowners might follow all the management recommendations to create shining examples of what quail habitat should look like. Unfortunately, only a few of them might reap the reward of more quail coveys while the others are left eagerly awaiting the arrival of wild bobwhites.

HABITAT SCALE AND CONNECTIVITY

Although the habitat is in place on each farm, two crucial components have been overlooked: scale and connectivity. The shotgun approach creates small bits of habitat across a much larger landscape, creating islands of habitat in a sea of undesirable cover.

In order to achieve success across a much broader area, quail managers realized that habitat management efforts needed to focus less on single farms and more on the entire landscape within a community. Habitat islands needed to connect to have a broader impact on quail populations.

While it might seem obvious that larger blocks of quail habitat equal more bobwhites, the challenge lies in connecting these areas. Kentucky's average farm size is around 160 acres. Quail managers would like to see more than 1,500 acres of continuous habitat to achieve

produced millions of quail for release across the Commonwealth.

The program had stopped by 1989, however, as quail populations continued to decline. The unsuccessful restocking efforts taught biologists that one major problem had been overlooked — the loss of quail habitat.

HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Addressing the loss of habitat on Kentucky's private lands became a primary focus of the department. In 1987, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife established its Habitat Improvement Program — HIP for short.

With more than 90 percent of the state in private ownership, wildlife biologists were given the task of working with private landowners to manage their properties in a way that would benefit quail and other wildlife. Funding was allocated to help landowners purchase seed and herbicide. The department shared the cost with landowners of various projects aimed at improving small game habitat and ultimately reversing the long-term quail population declines.

The Habitat Improvement



a healthy population of birds.

FOCUS AREA APPROACH

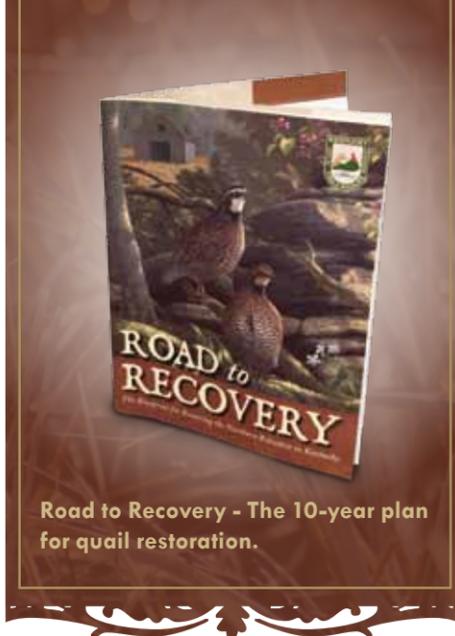
Creating large blocks of quail habitat is an excellent approach to obtain long-term huntable quail populations, but small farm sizes continued to plague quail managers.

In 2008, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife quail biologists embarked on a new journey, with a 10-year plan to restore quail populations. The plan, titled *Road to Recovery: The Blueprint for Restoring the Northern Bobwhite in Kentucky*, outlines the strategies needed to bring back bobwhites to Kentucky's rural landscapes.

This new approach centered on the establishment of Quail Focus Areas. Managers were well on their way to addressing the shortfalls of previous efforts, including the lack of habitat scale and connectivity.

These areas would become the focus of all things quail. Manpower and funding would be directed to these areas; biological monitoring would track quail populations each year. By focusing efforts, quail managers would be able to achieve success in shorter time. Success spawns success and the intent is to replicate the process across multiple areas, proving that restoring quail through proper habitat management can work.

Initially, eight quail focus areas were established across the Commonwealth: three on privately-owned properties and five on public areas. As the plan has evolved, so



have the focus areas. Currently, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife is actively managing or monitoring six areas.

Since Kentucky is a geographically diverse state, it was important to represent multiple land uses. The Livingston County Quail Focus Area and Shaker Village in Mercer County are good representations of working lands. Both have a mix of row crops, cattle pastures and hay fields.

Peabody Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Muhlenberg and Ohio counties represents reclaimed coal mine land. Clay WMA in Nicholas and Fleming counties is a good example of quail management in a heavily forested setting.

The Blue Grass Army Depot in

Madison County represents a typical central Kentucky landscape: open fields surrounded by forested draws and creek drainages. The Hart County Focus Area lies in the center of the massive Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program area. Most of the ground was former cattle land, recently retired from production to be managed as a grassland conservation area.

CURRENT SUCCESS

The focus area approach is gaining momentum — and having some successes. Peabody WMA has quickly become a model property for the effort. As the focus area concept came to life, Peabody quickly rose to the top, positioning itself to be one of the premier public lands quail areas in the entire southeast.

In August 2009, shortly after being named a quail focus area, Peabody embarked upon a multi-year quail and habitat management research project. University of Tennessee researchers monitor quail on the area by trapping birds and attaching radio collars to them.

Managers at Peabody have spent countless hours improving quail habitat through block disking, annual grain plantings, establishing shrubby cover and controlled burning of fields. Monitoring and research efforts show that the habitat enhancements are generating a positive response. Since the project began, fall covey count surveys have shown an 84 percent increase in the quail population.



Rough fields provide a good home for quail.



The Shaker Village Quail Focus Area is another excellent example of successful grassland habitat management to benefit bobwhite. Prior to 2009, the 3,000-acre property was primarily a beef cattle operation. Although grazed fescue pastures dominated the landscape, enough overgrown areas remained to provide cover for a few coveys of quail to hang on.

When Shaker Village's managers decided to get out of the cattle business, they searched for a new direction for their property. That led to a partnership with Kentucky Fish and Wildlife in February 2009. Managers converted fescue fields to native warm season grasses; wildflowers and controlled burning were reintroduced to the landscape.

Today, nearly 1,000 acres are being managed specifically for bobwhite quail — and the population response has been staggering. Prior to the initiation of the grassland management project, the property had an estimated six to 10 wild coveys of quail. Today, fall covey count surveys indicate that more than 50 wild coveys call Shaker Village home.

One of the unique and encouraging

aspects of the Shaker Village project is the addition of agriculture into the habitat management plan. Portions of the property are currently under agricultural lease. Fields of soybeans and corn are intermixed alongside overgrown areas managed for quail. It is a landscape reminiscent of Kentucky's glory days of quail hunting.

Quail managers are encouraged to see successful working agriculture and habitat management side by side. They hope to incorporate this model in other areas of the state.

The Livingston County Quail Focus Area also seeks to manage quail in a privately owned agricultural setting. Even more challenging, however, is the reality that this area is made up of multiple properties owned by several different landowners. Private ownership and smaller land parcels make management in this area challenging. Yet a successful model here could easily be repeated across much of the Commonwealth, creating tremendous potential for the rest of the state's quail population.

NATIONAL EFFORT

Declining quail populations are not

Native grasses give quail a place to hide.

limited to Kentucky's landscape. Bird numbers are down across the entire 25-state bobwhite range. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's Road to Recovery plan is part of a much larger effort to restore quail populations. The agency's quail plan is a stepped-down version of a national initiative known as the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, or NBCI.

The 25 member states, along with multiple universities and other organizations, combine resources and expertise to increase quail numbers across the range.

Restoring populations of wild bobwhite quail is perhaps the biggest challenge wildlife managers have ever faced. Previous successful reintroductions — including deer, turkey and elk — have all been the direct result of restocking. Restoring quail requires creating quality habitat. Creating this habitat means changing the way landowners use and view their land. The challenge is great but Kentucky is poised to lead the nation in achieving success through sound wildlife habitat management on public and private lands. ■